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Fox, Emily

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Racializing the Gender Friendship Gap

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Sociology

by

Emily Claire Fox

Committee in charge:

Professor Tristan Bridges, Chair

Professor Maria Charles

Professor Catherine Taylor

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The thesis of Emily Claire Fox is approved.

Professor Catherine Taylor

Professor Maria Charles

Professor Tristan Bridges, Committee Chair

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Racializing the Gender Friendship Gap

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Emily Claire Fox

ABSTRACT

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Emily Claire Fox

Research on friendship has consistently documented a gender friendship gap: men's friendships are less close, intimate, supportive, and satisfying than women's friendships. Explanations of such findings have generally relied on gender essentialist frameworks that erase possible intra-gender variation. Studies rarely account for multiply-constructed identities—notably missing is work that considers how ethno-racial identity impacts men's friendships. Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, I investigate how gender and ethno-racial identity affect Black, Hispanic, and white young adults' reported closeness to their best friend. Regression analyses demonstrate that the gender friendship gap is, in fact, a *racialized* gender friendship gap. White men report feeling less close to their same-gender best friends than Black men and women, Hispanic men and women, and white women too. These latter groups do not report significantly different levels of same-gender best friendship closeness. Results challenge the long-accepted finding that men's friendships are universally less close than women's friendships. In addition, this study demonstrates the importance of quantitative research informed by intersectionality theory and the error in using white research subjects as the unmarked norm.

INTRODUCTION

While sociologists have investigated familial, romantic, sexual, and market-related interpersonal relationships in depth, the field has yet to fully explore the arena of friendship. Much of the previous sociological scholarship considering friendship does so indirectly, as a control or independent variable in quantitative work or as a peripheral theme that emerges in qualitative studies. Rarely have sociologists considered friendship experiences as the primary subject of inquiry despite being in a unique position to consider both the micro, individual realities of friendship and the more systemic, institutional, and cultural forces shaping it.

Social status, identity, and environment variously constrain and enable with whom we are friends and what types of friendships we experience (Allan 1989). A broad and interdisciplinary body of scholarship, particularly within the field of psychology, consistently documents that men's friendships are less intimate, satisfying, supportive, and meaningful friendships than women's friendships (i.e., Bank and Hansford 2000; Demir and Orthel 2011; Fehr and Harasymchuk 2017; Mendelson and Aboud 1999; Reis, Senchak, and Solomon 1985; Reisman 1990; Sapadin 1988; Williams 1985; see review in Fehr 1996)—I call this disparity the “gender friendship gap.” Although recognition of this gender difference has extended beyond scholarly circles and into the general public's perception of friendship dynamics (Fehr 2004), surprisingly little research explores how friendship varies *between* groups of men. Given that masculinity both influences friendship experiences and is (re)constructed by them (e.g., Eisen and Yamashita 2019; Migliaccio 2010; Thurnell-Read 2012), further investigation of men's friendships is warranted. Notably missing is work that considers whether adult men's friendship

closeness varies by ethno-racial identity and how such a variance may impact gendered friendship experiences.

To address this gap, I use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), which asked a subsample of 18- to 21-year-old respondents questions about their best friend in 2002. Although no studies have previously investigated friendship closeness using this data set, it is particularly well suited because it directly asks respondents how close they feel to their best friend. Through a series of regression analyses, I compare reported friendship closeness for Black, Hispanic, and white men and women while controlling for a variety of respondent, friend, and relationship characteristics. These data suggest that the gender friendship gap is racialized and can be predominantly attributed to white young men's low levels of best friendship closeness. These findings challenge scholars to reconsider how identities co-construct friendship opportunities, experiences, and outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Men's same-gender friendships are described as more competitive, emotionally detached, and homophobic than women's same-gender friendships (e.g., Bird 1996; Hall 2011; Oswald, Clark, and Kelly 2004; Reid and Fine 1992). Research also shows that men's friendships are more instrumental and based on joint activities, while women's friendships are more expressive and emphasize self-disclosure and communication (e.g., Caldwell and Peplau 1982; Migliaccio 2014; Rublin 1985; Strikwerda and May 1992). These conclusions are so pervasive that they permeate cultural perceptions of friendship. For instance, Fehr (2004) found that when college students are given vignettes describing

a pair of fictive friends, the closeness of that friendship is rated lower by both men and women if the vignette contains men's names than if women's names are used.

Some have argued that the gender friendship gap is the result of men valuing different types of friendship than women (e.g., Wellman 1992) or from men defining intimacy and closeness in different ways than women (e.g., Swain 1989). Contrary to these essentialist explanations, however, Caldwell and Peplau (1982) show that men and women's desire for intimate friendships does not differ, and Reis, et al. (1985) found that men and women *perceive* levels of intimacy in recorded interactions similarly. Scholars have also documented that men report more intimacy, support, openness, and satisfaction in their friendships with women than in their same-gender friendships (Buhrke and Fuqua 1987; Elkins and Peterson 1993; Fischer and Narus 1981; Oswald et al. 2004; Reeder 2003), supporting the notion that men and women have similar friendship goals. Bank and Hansford (2000) provide more explicit evidence for this claim, showing that the gender friendship gap cannot be explained by gender differences in levels of importance or commitment to friendship alone.

Other work accounts for the gender friendship gap with a framework of gender differences (e.g., Pleck 1976). For instance, some scholars have suggested that men achieve closeness through activity-based interactions rather than emotion-based interactions like women (e.g. Floyd 1997). Yet, while work shows that while men are less likely than women to engage in self-disclosure with their same-gender friends (e.g., Jones 1991; Wright 2006), both men and women identify self-disclosure as most likely to foster friendship intimacy (Fehr 2004). Additionally, men who do engage with their men friends in more intimate ways—such as through self-disclosure and emotional support—report higher friendship satisfaction (e.g., Bowman 2008; Fehr and Harasymchuk 2017; Mattis

et al. 2001; Morman, Schrodt, and Tornes 2013). In other words, it is not that men and women value contrasting qualities in friendship, understand closeness differently, or achieve intimacy through different avenues. Rather, both men and women know what cultivates friendship closeness and are capable of it, but research shows that men engage in those intimacy-fostering activities and behaviors within their same-gender friendships less often.

The long-accepted theoretical explanation for this gender friendship gap contends that dominant masculine gender scripts conflict with the requirements of intimate friendship (e.g., Jourard 1971; Lewis 1978; Williams 1985). This was initially proposed in the 1970s and 80s when friendship research gained popularity among scholars and when sex role theory was the primary framework scholars employed to understand gender. However, research on specific friendship contexts and configurations since hints at more variability between groups of men than this explanation would suggest. For example, gay men's friendships with one another have been described as intensely supportive and emotional (Nardi 1999; Weston 1997), and straight men who accept their friend's sexuality also report closer friendships with gay men (Fee 2000; White 2008). Physically and emotionally close friendships between men are also widely documented and culturally accepted in the context of athletics (Anderson and McCormack 2015; Messner 1992). Class also plays a role: working class men have reported closer friendships with more frequent disclosure of personal troubles to same-gender friends than middle class men (Walker 1994). And finally, race appears to be yet another factor of variability in men's friendship closeness.

Race and ethnicity shape cultural expectations of men and the forms of masculinity available to them (e.g., Blume Oeur 2018; Christensen and Jensen 2014;

Collins 2005; Grundy 2012; Lemelle 2010; Ocampo 2012). Because of this, the sex category of “male” is insufficient for understanding men, as it erases significant variability among them. Intersectionality, a theory and mode of analysis Black women developed based on their lived experiences, provides a framework to understand how multiple aspects of identity are mutually constructing (Collins 2014; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Hancock 2016). This way of thinking, and research informed by it, challenges the assumption that whiteness is the “natural and unmarked racial backdrop for other social positions” (Carbado 2013:823). However, research on friendship has often approached gender and race as independent of one another, drawing conclusions about “men” in general.

Studies that consider race and friendship mostly highlight homophily in social networks and the barriers to inter-race friendships (e.g., Aboud, Mendelson, and Purdy 2003; Kao, Joyner, and Balistreri 2019; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; see review in Rose and Hopsital 2016). A smaller body of scholarship, which comes almost exclusively from the field of developmental psychology, investigates gendered and racialized friendship experiences. Research like that of Chu (2014) and Swain (2006) provide analyses of boys’ friendships and how they change throughout childhood and adolescence. Way (2011) and Pascoe (2011) add that boy’s friendship practices are not only gendered, but also racialized. And several studies show that the friendship gender gap does not exist for all adolescent ethno-racial groups, but results are inconsistent. DuBois and Hirsch (1990) report a friendship gender gap among white boys and white girls but find no significant difference between Black boys’ and Black girls’ peer support. More recently, Pagano and Hirsch (2007) find that the gender friendship gap exists for both Black and white adolescents. Rodríguez et al. (2014) also document a friendship

gender gap among Mexican-American adolescents. Similarly, Way and Chen (2000) document a gender gap in reported friendship support among Latino boys and girls, but not among African-American or Asian-American students. This important research area helps us understand how boys of different races understand and experience friendship, but these studies rely on small, non-representative samples and, at times, yield inconsistent results. Beyond this, though such studies point to potential ethno-racial differences in friendship closeness, their results cannot be extrapolated to adults because levels of friendship intimacy change as youth approach adulthood (e.g., Jones, Dembo, and Jones 1989; Way and Greene 2006).

Very few studies on adult men's friendships consider race and ethnicity, and those that do use samples of college students. Samter et al. (1997) found that ethnicity played a much larger role in predicting attitudes toward emotional support in same-gender friendships than did gender. More specifically, they document that African-American college students placed less emphasis than Euro-American students on emotional support. While not directly measuring friendship closeness, this finding suggests that race plays a significant role in at least some friendship patterns. Another study finds a gender friendship gap for Latino college students, but again, these results are based on a small, non-representative sample (Rodriguez et al. 2014).

To date, no representative survey research considers ethno-racial differences in adult men's friendship closeness, but several qualitative findings support the notion that men of some races have close and emotional friendships. Multiple studies (Jackson 2012; McClure 2006; McGuire et al. 2020) document that members of university organizations for Black men experience friendships characterized by brotherhood, emotionality, vulnerability, mutual accountability, and closeness. Franklin II (1992:206) adds that

working class Black men in particular described “warm, intimate, self-disclosing, holistic, and political” friendships with one another—characteristics that one would not expect based on the previous sex role explanations. Scholarship on Hispanic and Latino men’s friendships is extremely limited. Although a small portion of his sample, Greif (2009) finds that Hispanic men describe their friendships as close and physically affectionate.

Thus, while the gender friendship gap is widely documented, this body of scholarship suggests that we ought to be asking a different question. Rather than asking *whether* the gender friendship gap exists, research suggests that the next step is to examine *for whom* this gap exists. In this paper, I propose this question, specifically investigating whether the friendship gender gap exists for different ethno-racial groups.

DATA AND METHODS

I investigate the effect of ethno-racial identity and gender on friendship closeness using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor 2021). Although these data have not been previously used to explore friendship experience, the NLSY97 is uniquely suited for such investigations because it *directly* asks respondents how close they feel to their best friend. Other nationally representative data sets that have been used to examine friendship, such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health), only capture information like time spent together and shared activities. Some scholars have used these measures as proxies for friendship closeness (e.g., Kao and Joyner 2004; Rude and Herda 2010). While such variables provide valuable information on relationship patterns, the

NLSY97's question about perceived closeness is a novel variable for the investigation of self-reported perceptions of young adult friendship.

The NLSY97 is a nationally representative sample of approximately 9,000 American youth born between 1980 and 1984. Respondents were surveyed annually between 1997 to 2017 about a range of subjects, spanning employment, health, education, marital and sexual history, health, attitudes and beliefs, and crime. Black and Hispanic youth were over-sampled. I use the 1997 and 2002 waves of data. The 1997 wave provides some respondent demographic information not asked in subsequent years (i.e., gender, highest grade completed by parent). In 2002, the NLSY97 asked an age-restricted sub-sample of respondents in-depth questions about their best friend and their relationship with that person. Although the 2004 wave also asks questions about best friendships, fewer were included, and notably, the friend's demographic information was no longer collected. Thus, the 2002 wave of the NLSY97 provides the most recent nationally representative in-depth data available on adult friendship.

Respondents who were 13 or 14 years old during the initial 1997 wave of surveys, age 18 to 21 in 2002, were asked to identify their best friend ($n=3253$, 41.2% of 2002 wave respondents). Of this subsample, 1899 respondents (59.1%) indicated someone other than a parent, spouse, cohabitating partner, dating or sexual partner, or the other parent of their child. Only these respondents were asked further questions about that best friend, and thus are eligible for my sample. Respondents who responded that their best friend was a family member or romantic/sexual partner were not asked how close they felt to that person.

Considering the group that responded to questions about their friend, I use listwise deletion to address other missing values. I further exclude 84 participants who

self-identified in 2002 as an ethno-racial category other than Black, Hispanic, or white because several race categories were too small to draw substantive conclusions, as shown in Table 1. Levels of reported closeness among omitted respondents do not significantly differ from Black, Hispanic, and white respondents (omitted respondents mean: 8.62; included respondents mean: 8.84; *t*-test, two-tailed significance, $p=.153$). Further, the inclusion of omitted respondents does not significantly affect results according to sensitivity tests. The final sample used for analysis consists of 1647 respondents, age 18 to 21 in 2002.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Respondents Omitted due to Ethno-Racial Identity: Frequencies and Percent of Eligible Sample

	Men	Women	Total
	<i>n</i> %	<i>n</i> %	<i>n</i> %
Ethno-racial identity			
Asian	16 1.74%	12 1.48%	28 1.62%
Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	3 0.33%	4 0.49%	7 0.40%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2 0.22%	8 0.98%	10 0.58%
Multiracial	21 2.29%	14 1.72%	35 2.02%
Other	1 0.11%	3 0.37%	4 0.23%
Total omitted	43 4.68%	41 5.04%	84 4.85%
Total eligible for sample	918	813	1731

Measures

Best friendship closeness. The dependent variable of analysis measures respondents' reported closeness to their best friend. Respondents were asked, "On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not close at all and 10 is very close, how close do you feel towards [him/her]?" As previously mentioned, this novel measure facilitates direct analysis of respondents' reported *feelings* about their friendship.

Ethno-racial identity. In 2002, the NLSY97 launched a new race variable that allowed respondents to select multiple racial identities, which aligned with the latest census changes. Previously, respondents could only select one racial group. The new race identity options included *White, Black or African American, Asian, Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Other*. A separate question asked respondents if they are *Hispanic or Latino*, and some respondents refused to classify their race except as *Hispanic or Latino*. All respondents in the 2002 wave were asked the new race and ethnicity questions. For analysis, I group respondents in three mutually exclusive ethno-racial identity categories: *non-Hispanic Black or African American* (hereafter "*Black*"), *Hispanic or Latino* (hereafter "*Hispanic*"), and *non-Hispanic white* (hereafter "*white*"). Respondents who indicated their ethnicity as *Hispanic or Latino* are coded as *Hispanic* regardless of racial identity. This decision aligns with the compiled race ethnicity variable made by NLSY97 administrators from the first wave of data collection.

Reference category selection is not a neutral or arbitrary decision. Using dominant groups (i.e., men, white people, etc.) as the omitted category when presenting results reinforces their status as "normal" (Johfre and Freese 2021; Sprague 2016). As will be

shown, white respondents, particularly white men, are the exception when it comes to same-gender best friendship closeness. To highlight this difference, Black respondents are the reference category in my regression analyses.

Gender. Respondent gender is coded as man or woman based on the 1997 gender variable. The NLSY97 assigned all respondents either *male* or *female* during the first wave of surveys. No subsequent gender variables exist. Women are the reference category.

Friend characteristics. Respondents provided demographic information about their best friend, including gender, race, ethnicity, and age. From this information, I created dummy variables indicating if respondents are the *same gender* and *same ethno-racial identity* as their best friend. For best friend ethno-racial identity, I follow the categorization described above for *Black*, *white*, and *Hispanic* groups, but also include *Other*. If values for respondent and best friend ethno-racial identity are not the same, they are marked =0. I also include a dummy variable indicating if the absolute value of the best friend's age minus the respondent's age is two or less years. For example, a respondent who is 20 years old and whose best friend is between 18 and 22 years old is marked as =1. I selected this window because children in the same school grade level often are not exactly the same age, but their age would likely be within two years of classmates.¹ Most respondents are no longer enrolled in secondary school by the 2002 wave, but considering the mean length of time respondents have known their best friend (8.71 years), most met while still attending primary or secondary school.

Relationship characteristics. Respondents answered questions about their interactions and relationship. *Years known one another* reports how many years the respondent has known their best friend. *Communication frequency* records how often the participant communicates (via “email, phone, mail, or face to face”) with their friend “in a typical month.” Ordinal response categories range from *every day*=1 to *never*=7. Every day communication was the most common response and is the reference category. For ease of data presentation and because only 3.16 percent of the sample indicate speaking with their best friend *about once a month, less than once a month, or never*, I group these respondents together to create the category *about once a month or less*. Grouping the data in this way does not change results.

Controls. I control for age, college enrollment, parent’s educational attainment, and residential region to isolate effects of focal independent variables. Respondent *age* is measured in years, and survey design limits the possible range to 18 to 21 years. *College enrollment* is based on the 2002 NLSY97 created variable for school enrollment status in past year. Those who were enrolled in 2-year college, 4-year college, or graduate program are considered enrolled in college. *Highest grade completed by parent* measures the number of years of schooling the most educated residential parent of the respondent completed. In the first wave of surveys, the NLSY97 asked for the highest grade completed by the respondent’s biological mother and father and by their residential mother and father, if different. I use information pertaining to the residential parent(s) for analysis because their education is most directly related to the household’s socio-economic status. Due to this wording, the survey assumes that residential parents are different genders and excludes the possibility for families to report information on two

same-gender residential parents. Lastly, *region* classifies the U.S. census region in which the respondent resided during the same survey year as the best friend questionnaire. Although not significant in any models, region is retained as a control variable but not displayed in regression tables.

Analytic Approach

To understand the relationship between ethno-racial and gender identity on reported best friendship closeness, I run two sets of nested multivariate linear regression models. Sample weights are not used in regressions, as advised by NLSY97 administrators (Bureau of Labor Statistics n.d.). I first consider the effect of ethno-racial identity and gender separately without including control variables. I then include an interaction between respondent ethno-racial identity and gender. The second set of regression models include additional covariates as controls: respondent characteristics (i.e., age, college enrollment, parent's educational attainment, and region), friend characteristics (i.e., being the same gender, sharing an ethno-racial identity, and being close in age), and relationship characteristics (i.e., years known one another and communication frequency).² Again, I first consider the effect of ethno-racial identity and gender separately. I then introduce gender-by-friend-characteristic interactions and gender-by-relationship-characteristic interactions to understand how friend and relationship characteristics impact reported closeness differently for men and women respondents. Finally, I add the interaction between ethno-racial identity and gender.

I calculate predicted values of reported closeness by gender and ethno-racial identity using the final model of each table and graph these values with their 95 percent confidence intervals. While these figures facilitate visualization of differences between

groups, statistical significance of group differences is judged based on *t*-values of regression coefficients rather than based on non-overlapping confidence intervals. Use of the latter standard is associated with a higher risk of type II error (Schenker and Gentleman 2001). To report the regression coefficients and *p*-values associated with differences between some groups (e.g., white men compared to Hispanic men, white men compared to white women, etc.), I change the reference category to *white* or *Hispanic* for the model cited, but this is not shown.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the sample, overall ($n=1647$) and by gender (men $n=875$; women $n=772$), are displayed in Table 2. The mean value for reported closeness to best friend is 8.84, a high level of closeness on the 0 to 10 scale. However, this mean significantly differs by gender (*t*-test, two-tailed significance, $p=.000$). On average, men report feeling less close to their best friend (mean 8.60) than women (mean 9.11). In accordance with studies of social network homophily (see review in McPherson et al. 2001), a large majority of respondents indicate that their best friend is the same gender (89 percent), has the same ethno-racial identity (87 percent), and is close in age (85 percent). Men report having known their best friend for longer than women (men mean: 8.99; women mean: 8.40; *t*-test, two-tailed significance, $p=.042$). Almost all respondents (93 percent) communicate with their best friend at least once a week, and over half (51 percent) communicate with them every day. On average, women communicate with their best friend more often than men (*t*-test, two-tailed significance, $p=.000$). Fifty-four percent of women communicate with their friend every day compared to 48 percent of men.

Table 2. Sample Descriptive Statistics, Overall and by Gender: Means (Standard Deviations).

	M.	Men	Women	T-test
	(SD)	M.	M.	sig.
	(SD)	(SD)	(SD)	
Reported closeness to best friend	8.84 (1.36)	8.60 (1.41)	9.11 (1.24)	***
Respondent characteristics				
Man	0.53	1.00	0.00	
Ethno-racial identity				
Black	0.24	0.22	0.26	
Hispanic	0.19	0.19	0.18	
White	0.57	0.58	0.56	
Age	19.52 (0.58)	19.53 (0.58)	19.51 (0.57)	
Enrolled in college	0.45	0.40	0.52	***
Highest grade completed by parent	13.57 (2.96)	13.60 (2.95)	13.53 (2.97)	
Region of US				
Northeast	0.18	0.18	0.19	
North Central	0.25	0.27	0.23	
South	0.35	0.34	0.36	
West	0.22	0.22	0.22	
Best friend characteristics				
Same gender as R	0.89	0.88	0.90	
Same ethno-racial identity as R	0.87	0.88	0.85	
Age +/- 2 years of R age	0.85	0.85	0.85	
Friendship characteristics				
Years known one another	8.72 (5.88)	8.99 (5.94)	8.40 (5.80)	*
Communication frequency				***
Every day	0.51	0.48	0.54	
Several times a week	0.31	0.31	0.31	
About once a week	0.11	0.12	0.09	
About twice a month	0.04	0.05	0.04	
About once a month or less	0.03	0.04	0.02	
Observations	1647	875	772	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed significance, t-tests for differences between men and women).

Unadjusted models

To begin investigation of the effect of ethno-racial identity on closeness for men and women, I analyze a pair of nested multivariate linear regression models considering variables for gender and ethno-racial identity only, displayed in Table 3. Model 1 considers ethno-racial identity and gender separately, while Model 2 adds a gender by ethno-racial identity interaction. As expected, these models reveal a gender friendship gap when considering the effects of being a man and ethno-racial identity independently. Men report feeling less close to their best friends than do women, controlling for ethno-racial identity ($\beta = -.497, p=.000$; Table 3, Model 1). Additionally, Black and Hispanic respondents report closer feeling closer to their best friend than white respondents (Black: $\beta = .279, p=.000$; Hispanic: $\beta = .263, p=.003$; Table 3, Model 1), controlling for gender.

Table 3. Unadjusted Models Estimating the Effects of Ethno-Racial Identity and Gender on Reported Closeness to Best Friend

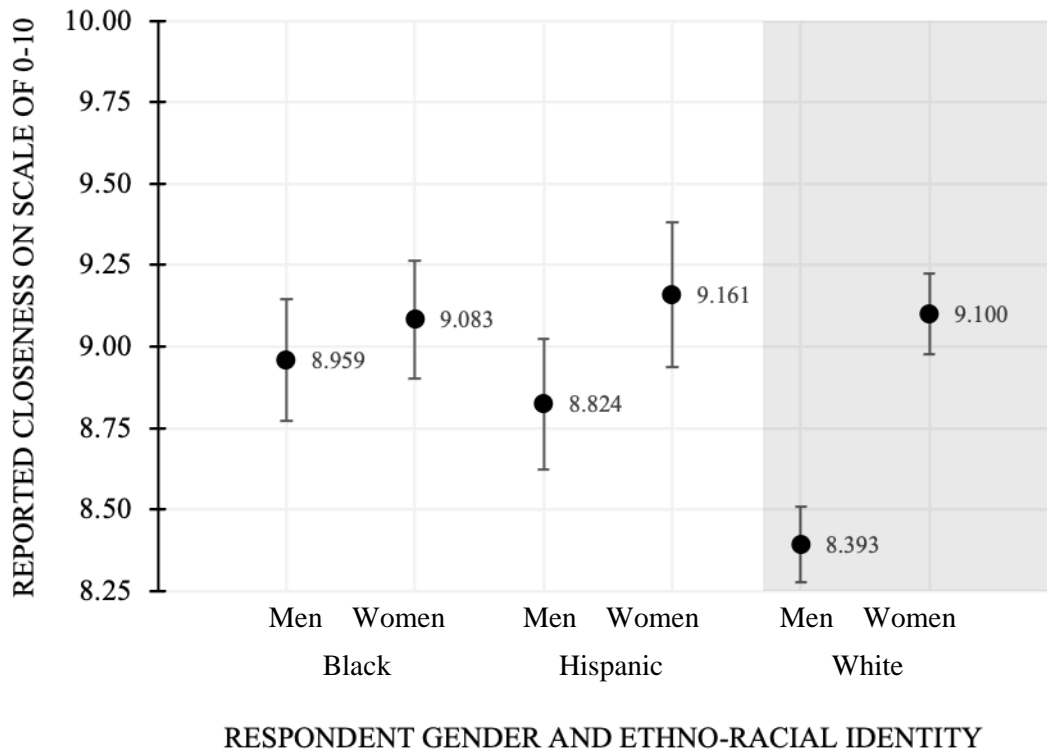
	Model 1	Model 2: gender*ethno- racial identity interaction
Respondent characteristics		
Man (<i>ref. cat.: woman</i>)	-0.497***	-0.125
Ethno-racial identity (<i>Black</i>)		
Hispanic	-0.016	0.077
White	-0.279***	0.016
Gender * ethno-racial identity		
Man * Hispanic		-0.212
Man * White		-0.582***
Constant	9.265***	9.083***
R^2	0.044	0.053
Observations	1647	1647

Note: Reference category in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

After adding the gender by ethno-racial identity interaction, the main gender effect drops, and only the interaction variable for *white men* is statistically significant ($\beta = -.582, p=.000$; Table 3, Model 2). Figure 1 displays predicted values for reported closeness to best friend by gender and ethno-racial identity based on Model 2. White men report feeling less close to their best friend than white women ($\beta = -.706, p=.000$; Table 3, Model 2). White men also report significantly lower feelings of closeness to their best friend than do Black men ($\beta = -.565, p=.000$; Table 3, Model 2) and Hispanic men ($\beta = -.430, p=.000$; Table 3, Model 2). The gender friendship gap is not statistically significant

Figure 1: Predicted Values of Reported Closeness to Best Friend Based on Unadjusted Models with 95% Confidence Intervals by Respondent Gender and Ethno-Racial Identity



Note: Predicted values calculated from Model 2, Table 3.
 Source: National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), 1997 & 2002 waves, US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

for Black men and women. On the other hand, like white men, Hispanic men report feeling less close to their friend than Hispanic women ($\beta = -.337, p=.027$; Table 3, Model 2). There is no significant difference in friendship closeness between women of different ethno-racial identities, nor between Black and Hispanic men. Considering reported best friendship closeness, white men are outliers when compared to Black men and women, Hispanic men and women, and white women.

Adjusted models

A possible explanation for the ethno-racialized gender difference documented in Model 2 (Table 3) could be that white men's friendships have different characteristics than Black and Hispanic men's friendships or women's friendships. For example, if white men communicate with their friends much less frequently than all other groups or have known their friends for shorter periods, those differences may account for their lower feelings of closeness. To test whether the ethno-racial and gender effects are explained by such differences between groups, I include covariates for respondent characteristics (i.e., age, college enrollment, parent's educational attainment, and region), friend characteristics (i.e., being the same gender, sharing an ethno-racial identity, and being close in age), and relationship characteristics (i.e., years known one another and communication frequency). Table 4 displays these adjusted models.

Relationship characteristic variables are significant in all adjusted models, but they do not account for the gender or ethno-racial effects found in the unadjusted models. Frequency of communication with a best friend is positively related to reported closeness to that friend. In addition, the number of years that friends have known one another is a statistically significant predictor of reported closeness for both men and women, such that

Table 4. Adjusted Models Estimating the Effects of Ethno-Racial Identity and Gender on Reported Closeness to Best Friend

	Model 1	Model 2: gender* control interactions	Model 3: gender*ethno- racial identity interaction
Respondent characteristics			
Man (<i>ref. cat.: woman</i>)	-0.482***	-0.440	-0.189
Ethno-racial identity (<i>Black</i>)			
Hispanic	0.093	0.073	0.142
White	-0.188*	-0.206*	0.028
Gender * ethno-racial identity			
Man * Hispanic			-0.164
Man * White			-0.469**
Age	-0.018	-0.024	-0.029
Enrolled in college	0.023	0.023	0.022
Highest grade completed by parent	-0.002	-0.001	-0.002
Friend characteristics			
Same gender as R	-0.236*	0.113	0.109
Man * same gender		-0.611**	-0.595**
Same ethno-racial identity as R	0.172†	0.295*	0.272*
Man * same identity		-0.282	-0.223
Age +/- 2 years of R age	0.180†	-0.115	-0.112
Man * age +/- 2 years		0.542**	0.570**
Relationship characteristics			
Years known one another	0.040***	0.021**	0.024**
Man * years known		0.033**	0.028*
Communication frequency (<i>every day</i>)			
Several times a week	-0.307***	-0.313***	-0.305***
About once a week	-0.392***	-0.408***	-0.392***
About twice a month	-0.641***	-0.632***	-0.621***
About once a month or less	-1.270***	-1.250***	-1.224***
Constant	9.337***	9.448***	9.407***
R ²	0.116	0.128	0.134
Observations	1647	1647	1647

Note: Reference category in parentheses. Models account for region of US.

† p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

knowing someone for longer equates to stronger feelings of closeness. I do not find any significant effects of age, college attendance, region, or parent's educational attainment on friendship closeness.

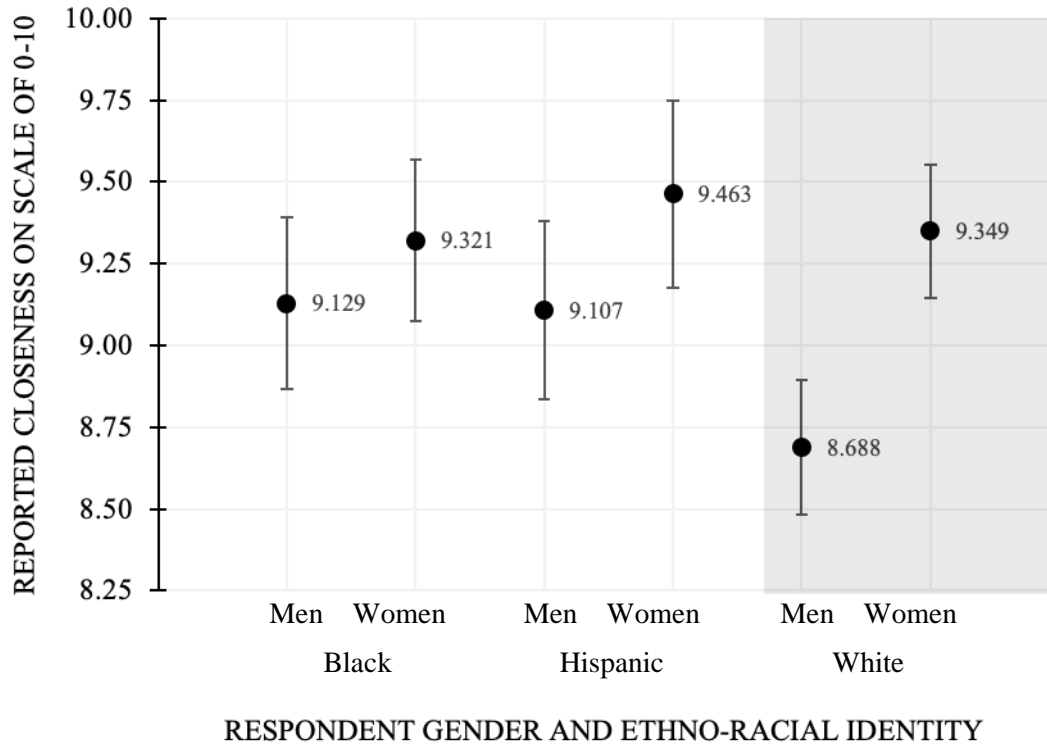
Similar to Model 1 (Table 3), Model 1 (Table 4) considers ethno-racial identity and gender separately, and results support the main effect of gender cited in previous studies on the gender friendship gap (e.g., Bank and Hansford 2000; Demir and Orthel 2011; Fehr and Harasymchuk 2017; Reis et al. 1985; Reisman 1990; Sapadin 1988; Williams 1985; review in Fehr 1996). Again, I find that men report feeling less close to their best friend than women ($\beta = -.482, p=.000$; Table 4, Model 1), holding constant all other variables in the model including ethno-racial identity. The finding that white respondents report lower levels of closeness than Black respondents ($\beta = -.188, p=.022$; Table 4, Model 1) and Hispanic respondents ($\beta = -.281, p=.004$; Table 4, Model 1) also holds true after adding controls. Thus, while variables for friend characteristics and relationship characteristics are significant, they do not account for differences in friendship closeness between men and women and between white, Black, and Hispanic respondents.

Previous research suggests that sharing demographic characteristics impacts friendship closeness and stability (e.g., Aboud et al. 2003; Kao and Joyner 2004; McPherson et al. 2001; Oswald et al. 2004; Reeder 2003; Rude and Herda 2010). Therefore, to isolate the effect of respondents' gender and ethno-racial identity on reported closeness, I include controls for friend characteristics. The addition of interactions between gender and friend characteristics and gender and years known one another in Model 2 (Table 4) continues to improve estimates of best friendship closeness. Sharing an ethno-racial identity with a best friend is only significant for women, with

those of the same group reporting slightly closer friendships ($\beta = .295, p=.027$; Table 4, Model 2). Interestingly, having a best friend who is close in age is a significant predictor of closeness for men but not for women. Men report feeling closer to their best friend if they are close in age than if they are not ($\beta = .542, p=.003$; Table 4, Model 2). Men with same-gender best friends report less close friendships than men whose best friend is a woman ($\beta = -.611, p=.003$; Table 4, Model 2). In other words, it is not the case that men have less close friendships than women, but rather, men whose best friend is also a man have less close relationships than women *and* men whose best friend is a woman. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that both men and women feel closer to friends who are women (e.g. Oswald et al. 2004; Reeder 2003). Individual sensitivity tests for the addition of each interaction variable reveal that the interaction between being a man and having a same-gender best friend accounts for the previously significant effect of gender on friendship closeness. However, the difference in same-gender friendship closeness between men and women alone does not explain the significant effect of whiteness documented in Model 1 (Table 4).

Finally, Model 3 (Table 4) includes an interaction between ethno-racial identity and gender, like Model 2 (Table 3), and retains control and interaction variables from Models 1 and 2 (Table 4). Being a white man remains a significant predictor of friendship closeness and accounts for the gender friendship gap in previous models. Further, the addition of control variables accounts for the gender friendship gap between Hispanic men and women reported in Model 2 (Table 3). Adjusted predicted values for reported closeness to same-gender best friend by gender and ethno-racial identity, based on the final model, are visualized in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Predicted Values of Reported Closeness to Same-Gender Best Friend Based on Adjusted Models with 95% Confidence Intervals by Respondent Gender and Ethno-Racial Identity.



Note: Predicted values calculated from Model 3, Table 4. For respondents living in the Northeast US who were enrolled in college in past year; whose age, number of years known best friend, and highest grade completed by parent are held at means; whose best friend is the same gender and ethno-racial identity as respondent; whose best friend's age is within 2 years of respondent's age; and who communicate with their best friend every day.
 Source: National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), 1997 & 2002 waves, US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The predicted values in Figure 2 most clearly demonstrate that the gender friendship gap only exists for white people. That is, white men report significantly lower levels of closeness to same-gender best friends compared to white women ($\beta = -.658$, $p=.027$; Model 3, Table 4), net other variables. However, this gap is not because both white men and white women differ from men and women of other ethno-racial groups, respectively. While white men report feeling significantly less close to their best friends

than both Black ($\beta = -.441, p=.000$; Model 3, Table 4) and Hispanic men ($\beta = -.419, p=.001$; Model 3, Table 4), net other variables, ethno-racial identity is not a significant predictor of best friendship closeness for women. Further, there is no statistically significant difference between Black and Hispanic men's reported closeness to their same-gender best friend.

In sum, results demonstrate that the relationship between respondent gender and ethno-racial identity accounts for the previously documented gender friendship gap, when holding constant potential explanatory covariates. This research shows that men, on average, do not have less close friendships than women, as previous scholarship has argued. Rather, white men's reported same-gender friendship closeness is so much lower than Black and Hispanic men's that when grouped together, men of different races have been presented as all suffering from less close friendships. My results show that when we examine young adults' intra-gender differences along the lines of ethno-racial identity, white men report less close same-gender best friendships than Black men and women, Hispanic men and women, and white women too. In fact, these latter groups do not report significantly different levels of same-gender best friendship closeness, even after controlling for respondent, friend, and relationship characteristics.

CONCLUSION

While a large body of research suggests that men experience less closeness and intimacy than women in same-gender friendships (i.e., Bank and Hansford 2000; Demir and Orthel 2011; Fehr and Harasymchuk 2017; Mendelson and Aboud 1999; Reis et al. 1985; Reisman 1990; Sapadin 1988; Williams 1985; see review in Fehr 1996), no research to date has explored if this gender friendship gap exists across ethno-racial

groups. To address this question, I use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), which asked 18- to 21-year-old respondents about their best friend and how close they feel to them in 2002. I compare reported best friendship closeness among Black, Hispanic, and white young men and women, revealing that the main effect of gender on same-gender best friendship closeness is explained by the interaction of gender and ethno-racial identity.

There is no statistically significant gender friendship gap among Black and Hispanic respondents—white young men and women are the only ethno-racial group that report differing levels of closeness to their same-gender best friend. However, because Black men and women, Hispanic men and women, and white women’s reported best friendship closeness do not significantly differ, it would be incorrect to label the difference between white men and white women a friendship *gender* gap. White men are the *only* ethno-racial gender group that displays a difference in same-gender friendship closeness when compared to all other groups in the sample. So, while I began this study asking for whom does the gender friendship gap exist, findings suggest that there is instead a *racialized gender* friendship gap. Variation in reported same-gender friendship closeness cannot be fully captured by ethno-racial identity or gender alone.

Results challenge the long-accepted finding that men’s same-gender friendships are less close than women’s same-gender friendships. One possible explanation for the universalizing assumption of the friendship gender gap is that much of the research on adult friendship is conducted on college campuses, where white men and women are overrepresented, especially in the 1970s and 80s when friendship research gained popularity. Even in more diverse samples like this one, white men’s low levels of friendship closeness decrease averages for all men enough to gain significance, as shown

in the models without gender and ethno-racial identity interactions (Model 1, Table 3; Model 1, Table 4).

More broadly, this study highlights the importance of intersectionality-informed research. Whiteness has often been considered the unmarked norm, and studies of primarily white samples have been extrapolated to all people (Carbado 2013; Sprague 2016). I show that what was previously documented as a gender difference is, in fact, a *racialized* gender difference. By considering gender and race as separate categories rather than intertwined identities, previous scholarship could not reveal that white men are outliers when it comes to friendship closeness.

Future research should establish if young white men's friendships have continued to be significantly less close since data were collected in 2002 and whether these patterns continue across the adult life course. Another important avenue for consideration is how white men's friendships compare to men of additional ethno-racial identities, such as Asian-American men, Indigenous men, and multi-racial men. Qualitative investigations of how adult men of different races understand, foster, and maintain close friendships could reveal previously undocumented variation in men's same-gender friendship patterns and why those differences exist, as well as if men are satisfied with their current friendships and what barriers prevent deeper connections. Similar to how Way (2011) engages with a diverse group of boys about their reflections, desires, and emotions regarding friendship, we need scholarship that extends such questions to men of different races, classes, and backgrounds. Researchers must prioritize racial and class diversity in samples to allow for comparisons and critically consider the systematic and institutional forces shaping men's lives and relationships.

Scholarship on men of color's relationships with one another is still extremely

limited, and results from this study should challenge additional researchers to broach the subject. More studies like that of Franklin II (1992) and White (2008), who give Black men the space to emotionally reflect on their friendships, will further reveal why and how some men forge close friendships with one another while others do not or cannot. Research that explores how whiteness shapes masculinity, and therefore white men's friendships, may illuminate additional ways that racial and gender privilege counter-intuitively limit opportunities for those they benefit.

NOTES

1. Changing the range of this variable to +/- 1 year did not significantly affect outcomes of other variables. Neither measure of age closeness was significant for women in any models. For men, on the other hand, being within 2 years of age of a best friend was a statistically significant predictor of reported closeness, while being within 1 year of age was not.
2. Other control variables that were explored but did not have a significant effect on reported closeness include if the respondent is cohabitating with a romantic partner, if the respondent lived in an urban or rural area, and respondent religion.

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